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MA YÜAN'S LANDSCAPE ROLL

A MONOGRAPH ON A MASTERPIECE OF CHINESE PAINTING IN THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION (FREER COLLECTION)

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IN THE FREER COLLECTION

BY

LAURENCE BINYON

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I

WITH the increased recognition, during the last few years, of the great achievements of Chinese painting, the names of certain preëminent masters begin to come more readily to Western lips, and some distincter image of the personality expressed in their work emerges from the rich but remote and shadowy background hardly as yet explored. Among these names is that of Ma Yüan, one of the most renowned painters of that wonderful Sung era which lasted from the tenth to the thirteenth century; and his name brings with it associations of great pines and mountain solitudes and

contemplative sages, portrayed with grand character and profound feeling.

The magnificent landscape roll here reproduced is one of the greater glories of Mr. Freer's collection. It is probably Ma Yüan's masterpiece. A few fine paintings by him, or at least thought worthy of his brush, have come West in recent years, and some have found a home in American collections; but neither among these, nor among those in Japan which have been published, is there anything to rival this. We learn indeed from an inscription on the painting that it was in old times considered to be unique in scale and importance among the master's paintings. From the same source we learn something of its history.

The roll measures 25¼ inches in height by 504½ inches in length. It is painted on a single piece of rather

light-coloured silk in ink, with subdued tones of green, red, yellow, and blue. It is in excellent preservation, considering its age. At the end of the roll is the signature: "In the second month of the third year of Chao Hsi [1192 A.D.] the public servant Ma Yüan painted this glorious view of river and mountain by Imperial order."

Also at the end of the roll, on the upper part of the picture, is an inscription which is dated the thirteenth year of Hung Wu—*i.e.*, 1380 A.D. In the interval between the date of this inscription and the date of the signature the Sung dynasty had come to an end, the Yüan dynasty had come and gone, and the Ming dynasty had been newly established.

The inscription runs as follows:

"This landscape was presented by a eunuch to the new Emperor [the first

Emperor of the Ming dynasty]. The Emperor accepted the gift, but at the time bestowed little attention upon it. Twenty-seven years afterwards, the empire being now settled into peace, a banquet was held at the palace. During the banquet the landscape was brought out and shown to the dignitaries present; and one called Chin Yu-tzŭ, the Grand Secretary, was commanded by the Emperor to write this inscription on the picture:

"The painter Ma Yüan is one of the three greatest of the Sung masters, the other two being Li T'ang and Hsia Kuei. All the paintings of Ma Yüan, except this one, are of limited dimensions; and because of this he was called 'One-horn Ma.'[1] A big work like this is unique in his career. Moreover,

[1] "Ma" means horse. Why a horse should be credited with horns is not clear. I am indebted to Mr. S. G. Cheng and Mr. A. D. Waley for the translation of the various inscriptions.

pieces of silk more than four feet long, such as this is painted on, are not allowed to be possessed by anyone outside of the Imperial court.

"In the middle of the Sung era the empire was broken in pieces, yet how passionately its unity was cherished we divine from the brush of the masters. So noble a landscape is a fair omen for the opening reign of the dynasty. The writer rejoiced in the Imperial command to inscribe these words on the picture."

The inscription is followed by the names of certain officials, who added their signatures in the year 1428.

Of the writer of the inscription, we know that he was a native of Hsin-Kan who passed his "chin-shih" examination in 1400. He afterwards held various official posts, and finally became a member of the Board of Rites. He died in

1431, at the age of sixty-four. His name was Shen, but he was generally known by his "style," Yu-tzŭ.

Of the further vicissitudes of the painting we know nothing till the year 1871, when it was remounted, and inscriptions were written on the new mount, both at the beginning and the end of the roll, by a connoisseur called Tsē Tao-jēn—*i.e.*, "Tsē the priest." First, in very large characters comes the title,

"MA TAI-CHAO'S BEST PICTURE IN THE WORLD,"

followed by this inscription:

"The Tai-Chao [a title of Ma Yüan's] was nicknamed 'The Horse of One Horn': a proof that, at the time, the pictures he painted were all minutely drawn on small pieces of paper. A great, sweeping view of ocean, like this picture, is of the utmost rarity. Of

old, Tung Wēn-min (Tung Ch'i Ch'ang), in his note on the Ch'ing Pien Yin Chü picture by Wang Shan-ch'iao,[1] said: 'This is the best picture by Wang Shu-ming in the world.' In reality that was not Shu-ming's only masterpiece. But *this* roll certainly has no fellow; and the words written here at the beginning [*i.e.*, those in large characters] in imitation of Tung Ch'i-Ch'ang's dictum are in truth no idle boast. Written by Tsē Tao-jēn."

At the end of the roll, on the mount, is another inscription by the same critic, in which the fact of chief interest is the record that Tsē Tao-jēn wrote his inscriptions "in the tenth year of Tung-chih [*i.e.*, 1871], six hundred and eighty-one years after the date of the picture."

[1]Wang Mēng, known also as Shu-ming and Shan-ch'iao, was one of the most celebrated landscape painters of the Yüan dynasty.

II

MA YÜAN came of a family greatly distinguished in art. No less than seven painters of this family achieved fame. The first in order was Ma Pēn, who flourished about 1086–1094. He was a native of Ho-Chung. He painted Buddhist subjects, landscapes, birds and flowers, etc., but was especially famous for his mastery in grouping wealth of detail in a small compass, as in those traditional subjects of which the Chinese are so fond—"The Hundred Horses," "The Hundred Oxen," and similar themes.

In the next generation was Ma Hsing-tsu, whose precise relationship to Ma Pēn is not known. His paintings were collected and admired by the Emperor Kao Tsung (1127–1163 A. D.). He painted figures, birds and flowers, and landscape. He had two sons who fol-

lowed in his footsteps and who both received the order of the Golden Girdle: these were Ma Kung-hsien and Ma Shih-jung. Ma Shih-jung again had two sons, Ma K'uei and Ma Yüan. Ma K'uei is said to have excelled his brother in the painting of birds, but to have been inferior to him in all other respects. Ma Yüan had a son, Ma Lin, who had by no means the power of his father, but who is recorded to have put his own signature on paintings by his father in order to increase his own reputation: a curious inversion of the habits of the forger, since we usually find the great master's signature on the inferior work.

Ma Yüan, the greatest genius of this brilliant family, was the most eminent of the painters of the court of Ning Tsung, 1194–1224 A. D. The courts of kings have not always proved a healthy atmosphere for art. Too often the pa-

tronage of princes has cramped and enervated what it has sought to foster. But Ning Tsung was one of those rare rulers who not only wished to glorify his reign but had a genuine and disinterested sympathy with artists.

Less than a century before, another emperor, Hui Tsung, had gathered around him a galaxy of artists from every province; had founded an academy, and himself won no mean distinction as a painter. His reign saw the culmination of the art of Northern Sung, when the capital was still in the north, on the banks of the Hoang-Ho. After the surrender of Northern China to the Kin Tartars in 1126, when Hui Tsung himself was taken captive, to die in exile some ten years later, the Imperial court migrated far to the south. The new capital was Hang-chow, a city set close to the broad estuary of the Tsien-

tang, in the neighbourhood of a hill-surrounded lake, and itself intersected by waterways crossed by countless bridges. The splendours and amenities of the city, far surpassing anything yet attained in contemporary Europe, are described by Marco Polo, who saw Hang-chow when its day was already declining. It was in this marvellous city with its beautiful surroundings that Kao Tsung, and after him Ning Tsung, gathered together the artists who were to rival and almost surpass the achievements of the court of Hui Tsung.

It is characteristic of this art of Southern Sung that its supreme expression was in landscape. The absence of vanity and vainglorious motives in the mind of these Chinese emperors could not be better shown than by their encouragement of such themes in preference to portraiture and kindred sub-

jects. And it was in obedience to the dominant thought of the time, which set so much store on the contemplation of nature, that landscape rose to such importance. So there arose the school whose crowning glories were Ma Yüan and his strong rival Hsia Kuei: a school of landscape-painting which for loftiness of emotion and grandeur of conception has surely never yet been equalled in the world.

How did this school arise, and what were the springs of its inspiration? The splendid age of T'ang had produced in its three centuries an art of which the merest vestiges remain, but which certainly rivalled in glory the contemporary poetry still extant. The T'ang Buddhist paintings recently discovered at Ch'ien fo-tung by Stein and Pelliot are rarely of the finest workmanship, but they show qualities of magnificent

design and colour, reflected from the central achievement of masters like Wu Tao-tzŭ and his followers. With the Sung period the temper of art changed: it became more contemplative, more intimate, and landscape now took the foremost place among the painter's themes. This may seem strange to us, since landscape art with us has never been recognized as of equal importance with figure-painting. Indeed, the notion still lingers in the art schools of Europe that landscape is, and should be, the refuge of those who have not been able to master the figure. We can best conceive of Chinese landscape at its greatest, if we imagine a painter like Titian or Rembrandt, great masters of figure-design, choosing to devote their deepest interest and their fullest powers to landscape themes. But this is something which we can hardly imagine; and

indeed the difference in choice was no accident, but had its roots deep in national temperament and outlook.

Some writers have supposed that the extraordinary love of nature manifested by the Chinese, as their early literature shows, was the outcome of the habits of an agricultural people. But other agricultural peoples have not been so distinguished; and deeper causes must be sought.

Unless we stray outside the thought of Europe, we are apt to take for granted, as if it were universal, a psychological heritage which, when coolly examined, shows strangely incongruous elements. Pagan philosophy and mythology; medieval Christianity; modern science: the Western mind of to-day is impregnated with all these elements, which yet remain more or less unfused. The conception of man's place in the universe

varies according to individual temper and training, and varies even within single minds, according to the standpoint adopted for the moment. When we turn to the Far East we have to forget all this; we have to realize that for the Chinese mind from very early times the universe was conceived as a stupendous unity, through which the eternal energy of life streamed under innumerable and ever-changing forms.[1]

There was for the Chinese no break of continuity between the life of man and the life of animals, plants and flowers, rocks and streams; no traditional opposition between the human and the non-human. Hence in art, landscape seemed the greatest and worthiest subject of the brush because it included most of the elements of life.

[1] Compare "La Philosophie de la Nature dans l'Art d'Extrême Orient, par Raphael Petrucci" (Paris, 1911), where the contributions of Confucianism, Laoism and Buddhism to Chinese thought are luminously analyzed.

And, more than this, it was the theme in which the spirit of man could best find itself. Contemplating the painting, his spirit could go out into it, free and rejoicing; it could recognize, in the million forms of life, subtle affinities with its own nature. Hence an insight and understanding which could match the elemental energies set free in storm and torrent with that conviction of joy in the movement of life which is equally elemental in mankind. Human forms were set in the landscape as a natural part of it, not inserted for picturesqueness' sake or as a homage to tradition. The Chinese or Japanese conception of the garden—not as a fenced and ordered seclusion conquered from wild nature and tamed to pleasant human use, but as a miniature of all free nature, containing every feature and element in symbol—illustrates and reflects the

contrast between the Chinese and the European conception of landscape art.

To landscape, then, were devoted an enthusiasm and an ardour of scientific study such as in the West has only been bestowed—at least till the nineteenth century—on figure-painting. And landscape themes, already loved and studied by many of the T'ang masters, became under Southern Sung the supreme mode of expression for the spirit of the age. This is what gives landscape masters like Ma Yüan and Hsia Kuei their unique position in the history of art. We have had great masters of landscape in the West, but none of them has been the central expression of the thought and dominant emotion of their times; still less has there been a whole school of landscape in which such thought and emotion have been collected and crystallized.

III

THERE are a number of paintings by, or attributed to, Ma Yüan in Japan, and among these the following have been reproduced and published:

1 A SAGE CONTEMPLATING THE MOON. Kuroda Collection. (Kokka, No. 160. Shimbi-Taikwan, Vol. VIII, No. 12.)

2 PINES AND ROCKY PEAKS. Iwasaki Collection. (Kokka, No. 234. Shimbi-Taikwan, Vol. XI, No. 8. Also in Binyon, "Painting in the Far East," pl. 19.)

3 SAGE UNDER A GREAT PINE-TREE. Tanaka Collection. (Kokka, No. 202. Also in Petrucci, "La Philosophie de la Nature," etc., pl. 3.)

4 A SOLITARY ANGLER. Inouye Collection. (Kokka, No. 23. Shimbi-Taikwan, Vol. XIII, No. 10.)

5 MISTY LANDSCAPE, WITH SAGE ON A TERRACE. Umakoshi Collection. (Kokka, No. 147.)

6 THE PRIEST CHING LIANG AND HIS DISCIPLE. (Kokka, No. 123.)

7 Tung-Shan Crossing the River. Akaboshi Collection. (Shimbi-Taikwan, Vol. XVII, No. 13.)

8 Sage in a Boat. Kuroda Collection. (Shimbi-Taikwan, Vol. XX, No. 9.)

The first five paintings are also reproduced in Tajima's "Masterpieces Selected from the Fine Arts of the Far East," Vol. VIII.

The first three of these especially have a character of singular grandeur. But for the full orchestral beauty of which Ma Yüan's art was capable, we must turn to Mr. Freer's roll. Here all the favourite motives of the painters are taken up, one after another, responding to successive moods of feeling. The moment that we open the roll we feel a delightful exhilaration, as from a sudden breath of mountain air. And this is not so much from the actual vision disclosed of hills and misty river-shores,

as from the communication of the painter's mastery of all those complex elements,—the structure of the mountains, the subtle planes of atmosphere, the sense of liquid water and of sodden or firm ground, the pliancy of the reeds, the elastic toughness of the trees, the immoveability of the rocks: all these he understands and renders with subtle modulations of his brush-stroke, so that the landscape becomes a mirror of the mind of man which understands and rejoices in its understanding. But this intellectual pleasure is merged in an emotion which belongs to the sense of life itself. We feel ourselves braced or melted according to the mood evoked. Crag and pine; rushing torrent and nestling cottage roof; shadows in the misty spaces; the winding of mossy paths; the abrupt jut of a boulder; ranges lost on the horizon: all these become the alphabet

of a glorious language vibrating through us with power to soothe and stir.

If anyone have doubts of the authenticity of such a painting as this—and it behoves us to be critical—let him note how his imagination will let him enter the picture and roam this country that it discloses; he will find everywhere his feet on firm ground, he will know where it rises and where it slopes away, he will not confuse the near and the distant or have the sensation of one who misses a step on a dark staircase. But the copyist, and the painter who is not a master, will not endure this test. The landscape drawings of Domenico Campagnola, compared with the drawings of Titian, are a case in point; charming as they are, we find *when we walk into them* that we lose our treading and do not know where we are; they reflect a mind unequal to grasping structure and

resorting to a mask of decoration. There is the same division between the landscape drawings of Rembrandt and of his imitators.

Note here too—another test—Ma Yüan's figures in this landscape. How alive they are! Each is a person, each absorbed in what he is doing. How expressive are their gait and gestures! One seems to be transported into the landscape, and to become one of those figures,—to smell the freshness of the water-side, to feel the trembling of leaves, to hear the roar of waterfalls, to be wandering the rocky paths, or putting out in a boat to cross the river where the water ripples past the bows.

We have seen that, according to tradition, this is Ma Yüan's only work on a really big scale. The Sung masters were indeed notably fond of making quite small paintings, of the kind that

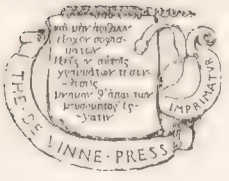
were collected in albums, such as the well-known album belonging to Marquis Kuroda. The horizontal roll, however, was a form long consecrated in Chinese tradition. Dr. Laufer has sought to prove that the practice of painting landscape in this special form, peculiar to China and Japan, arose out of the art of map-making. With all deference to so high an authority, I would observe, however, that Dutch and English landscape-painting also arose mainly out of topographical "views," yet did not develop into any form of this kind. Is it not more likely that the Chinese readily adopted this form because they were a literary people and followed instinctively the example of the manuscripts which were also in roll form? Moreover, it is certain that the earliest picture-rolls were not landscapes but figure-subjects. This is not, however, to deny the influence

of topography and map-making, which doubtless helped to provide that basis of structural accuracy which is so remarkable in the greatest Chinese landscapes, and which, moreover, is insisted on in essays by Kuo Hsi and other painters. But it is more interesting to consider what a form of art becomes than what it arose from; and the Chinese genius shows its innate power of adaptation by the way in which it has transformed the tediousness of a prosaic record into a rich complexity of interwoven themes, which Dr. Laufer and other critics have aptly compared to the masterpieces of European music.

Sesshiu may well have seen this very roll when he came to China from Japan in 1468, and the memory of it may have inspired the famous landscape roll which he painted in ink and which is now in the collection of Prince Mori. In

Sesshiu's work the landscape is transposed into a more abstract key; the energy poured into stroke and blot of the brush, the play of light and dark tones, count for more in themselves. The vehemence of it exhilarates; but we miss the depth and intimacy, the overflowing abundance, the melting distances, the infinite horizons, which clothe so genially the strength and grandeur of Ma Yüan.

LAURENCE BINYON.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